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COLLECTION: VOCABULARY STUDIES AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF LANGUAGE LEARNING: TOWARDS GREATER INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION

RESEARCH

Vision and Vocabulary: Chinese EMI Undergraduates' Ideal L2 Selves and Motivation to Learn Vocabulary

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ABSTRACT

Despite its significance for second language (L2) learning, the relationship between motivation and vocabulary learning remains underexplored. Existing research has predominantly adopted a quantitative approach, overlooking the complex and dynamic nature of both constructs. Addressing this gap, this study draws on Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System and adopts a qualitative approach to examine the relationship between L2 learners' ideal L2 selves and their motivation to learn vocabulary. In doing so, it captures how these processes are interconnected, shaped by learners' individual goals and contexts, and experienced from their own perspectives. The data were collected from eight second-year students enrolled in English-medium programs at two universities in China. Participants produced visual representations of their ideal L2 selves, identified associated lexical items, took part in a semi-structured interview, and completed general and academic vocabulary tests. The findings show that the participants' ideal L2 selves were vivid, field-specific, and perceived to be attainable. Their images revealed a strong desire for achievement and recognition. Whether academic, technical, or general, vocabulary linked to those future selves was viewed as meaningful, motivating, and important for their desired careers.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Second language (L2) motivation and vocabulary knowledge are significant factors affecting university students' ability to engage with academic study (Zhang et al., 2017). Although both areas have been widely explored independently, much less is known about the relationship between L2 motivation and vocabulary learning (Muir & Szudarski, 2025). The few studies examining this have predominantly adopted a quantitative approach, focusing on correlations between L2 learners' motivation to learn vocabulary (measured by a motivation questionnaire) and their vocabulary knowledge (measured by in-class vocabulary tests) (Lee et al., 2022; Tanaka, 2017; Tseng & Schmitt, 2008; Zhang et al., 2017). These studies suggest a linear cause–effect relationship between the two constructs, which does not fully capture their complexity and learner-specific factors such as learning goals, experiences and perceptions. This study addresses this gap by concentrating on qualitative data that offer a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between students' L2 motivation and vocabulary learning, focusing specifically on Chinese EMI undergraduate students' ideal L2 selves, their vocabulary choices, and their motivation to learn vocabulary.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 L2 MOTIVATION RESEARCH

L2 motivation research originated in the late 1950s with Gardner and Lambert's (1959) social-psychological approach distinguishing between two motives: integrative (reflecting learners' desire to integrate into an L2 community) and instrumental (focused on practical benefits such as career advancement). Over time, a range of other theories emerged, among which self-determination theory (SDT) became particularly influential (Noels et al., 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Its key components are intrinsic motivation (engaging in an activity because of personal interest and enjoyment) and extrinsic motivation (engaging in an activity to obtain rewards or avoid punishment). The theory suggests that motivation is driven by individuals' needs to feel competent, autonomous, and connected to others (relatedness). However, both theories have faced criticisms. With the spread of English as a lingua franca, the relevance of integrative motives has been questioned and the assumption of SDT that psychological needs are universal across cultures has also been challenged, as cultures differ in their values and beliefs (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Oyserman et al., 2002).

Acknowledging the limitations of earlier theories, Dörnyei (2005) proposed the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) based on possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and self-discrepancy theories (Higgins, 1987). Possible selves refer to individuals' representations of themselves in the future. They are who one would like to become, one could become, and one fears becoming (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Despite the assumption that possible selves are future-oriented constructs, they are interconnected with people's past and current selves (Oyserman et al., 2012; Oyserman et al., 2015). Building on possible selves theory, Higgins (1987) identifies three distinct self components: the actual self, which represents the attributes people believe they possess; the ideal self, which relates to the qualities they would ideally like to have (e.g., aspirations, hopes, and wishes); and the ought self, which represents the qualities they ought to possess (e.g., obligations, responsibilities, and duties). Adapting both theories to the demands of language learning, Dörnyei (2005) developed the L2MSS, which consists of three core components: ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self and the L2 learning experience. The ideal L2 self refers to learners' personal aspirations related to their future language use; for example, they might envision themselves as fluent users of English (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014). The ought-to L2 self represents attributes that learners believe they should possess to meet others' expectations, such as those of parents, teachers and peers. The third component, the L2 learning experience, concerns learners' immediate learning context, including the classroom environment and learning experiences (Dörnyei, 2009). Compared with the other two components, the ideal L2 self is considered the strongest driver of L2 motivation, acting as a self-guide that can foster powerful engagement in language learning (Brady, 2019; Ryan, 2009).

It has been argued that people who have a discrepancy between their ideal and actual selves are motivated to reduce it (Higgins, 1987). However, having an ideal L2 self does not necessarily imply that learners will actively engage in L2 learning (Hessel, 2015). For the ideal self to act

as a source of motivation, it needs to be perceived as both available and accessible (Hamman et al., 2013; Higgins, 1987; Norman & Aron, 2003; Oyserman et al., 2015). This is more likely to happen when several conditions are met. First, the ideal (L2) self should be congruent with and connected to the learner's actual self and other possible selves, rather than be perceived as conflicting with them (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014; Oyserman et al., 2006). Second, the ideal self should be specific and relevant to the learner's immediate context rather than abstract or vague (Conway & Clark, 2003; Erikson, 2007; Hamman et al., 2013). In this case, it might be perceived as feasible rather than overly difficult to attain (Sahakyan et al., 2018). In addition, when the desired self is not distant, it is more likely to be perceived as real, initiating realistic judgements and a well-defined action plan (Oyserman & James, 2011; Ryan & Irie, 2014).

2.2 IDEAL L2 SELF AND VISION

The motivational power of the ideal L2 self is strongly associated with learners' ability to construct vivid and concrete images, a capacity usually referred to as vision (Dörnyei & Chan, 2013). Vision involves a sensory-rich mental representation of desired future selves that is internalized and emotionally experienced, and which can drive motivational behavior. Such imagery is usually based on the same neural processes as real experiences (Stopa, 2009) and can be mentally experienced in ways similar to actual selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Considering the vivid and emotionally meaningful nature of desired selves, van der Helm (2009, p. 98) describes visions as "you-can-do-it-if-you-really-believe-in-it self help manuals" which can generate and guide change, arguing that visions signify a preferred future rather than merely a likely one.

Importantly, visions differ from goals as they involve a strong sensory element, which might make desired selves feel realistic, emotionally engaging and effective in sustaining motivation over time (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014). Research suggests that learners who are able to generate elaborate and well-defined images of their ideal L2 selves tend to have stronger motivation and higher levels of engagement than those with vague and underdeveloped images (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Muir & Dörnyei, 2013). As Dörnyei (2009) argues, the ability to create vivid and detailed ideal self images "makes possible selves larger than any combinations of goal-related constructs" (p. 15), a claim supported by the fact that future selves can mentally be experienced in ways similar to actual selves, allowing people to sense their imagined selves as real (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

The link between vision, imagery and motivation has been supported by a growing body of intervention studies (e.g., Dörnyei & Chan, 2013; Magid & Chan, 2012; Safdari, 2019; Sampson, 2012). For example, Magid and Chan (2012) found that guided imagery and future-self activities not only increased learners' effort and time investment but also enhanced confidence and helped learners develop clearer and more specific goals. Their reflections suggest that imagining themselves using English successfully served as a powerful motivational trigger, with effects that persisted beyond the intervention itself. Similar findings emerge from Safdari's (2019) study, where learners' reflections showed increased motivation, clearer and more vivid ideal L2 selves, more specific goals, and improved learning strategies, alongside more positive attitudes towards language learning.

Non-intervention studies similarly confirm that link. For example, You et al. (2016) conducted a large-scale survey with over 10,000 Chinese L2 learners to examine some of the key aspects of the motivational capacity of L2 learning vision. They found that the motivational role of vision varies across learners; for those who actively visualize their L2 selves, these images were more motivating, while those without such imagery relied more on external pressures and the avoidance of negative outcomes. Although highly motivated learners of both genders showed similar patterns, females were more likely to use visualization and to experience positive development in their imagery over time.

Taken together, previous studies provide useful insights into how learners' future self images and visualization processes support their motivation and sustained effort in language learning. However, most research examining the role of learners' ideal selves in the context of L2 motivation has focused on overall motivation rather than a more specific language domain such as vocabulary. This is surprising given that vocabulary knowledge is central to academic success particularly in higher education, the context where this study was conducted. Students need substantial vocabulary to engage with discipline-specific academic texts, complete assignments, and participate in professional discourse (Coxhead, 2000; Nation, 2022). Given

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the significance of L2 vocabulary, it is therefore important to examine how motivation to learn it has been approached in the literature.

2.3 MOTIVATION TO LEARN L2 VOCABULARY

Despite the importance of motivation for L2 learning, the limited empirical research has mainly focused on the relationship between L2 learners' motivation and their vocabulary knowledge. Several studies have examined the predictivity of motivation on L2 vocabulary knowledge. Lee et al. (2022) and Tanaka (2017) examined motivation from the perspective of Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination framework, while Zhang et al. (2017) investigated it from the perspective of Zimmerman's (2013) self-regulated learning theory. Tanaka (2017), Lee et al. (2022) and Zhang et al. (2017) all used questionnaires from previous studies (Noels et al., 2000; Park & Kim, 2012; Tanaka, 2014, 2016) to examine motivation and existing vocabulary tests (Aizawa & Mochizuki, 2010; Nation & Beglar, 2007; Read, 1993; Schmitt et al., 2001) to measure vocabulary knowledge. Their findings are consistent. Tanaka (2017) found that intrinsic motivation and identified regulation (a kind of extrinsic motivation) positively predicted L2 vocabulary knowledge. Lee et al. (2022) also found that motivation significantly predicted L2 learners' vocabulary knowledge in both breadth and depth; compared with extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation was a stronger predictor of L2 learners' vocabulary knowledge. Likewise, Zhang et al.'s (2017) results indicated that intrinsic motivation positively predicted vocabulary knowledge, whereas extrinsic motivation did not. Focusing on the Chinese context, Tseng and Schmitt (2008) investigated the dynamic and fluctuating nature of motivation in the language learning process among EFL learners in Mainland China and Taiwan. Their findings suggest that learners' vocabulary knowledge is associated with self-capacity, which is supported by their initial motivation, highlighting the importance of fostering motivation and self-capacity in vocabulary learning.

To the best of our knowledge, only Zheng (2012) has investigated L2 learners' motivation in vocabulary learning under the L2MSS framework. They examined the relationship between motivation and vocabulary development of four third-year EFL English-major students in Mainland China over an academic year. The participants' motivational self images were explored through interviews whereas their knowledge was measured by lexical profile analysis of their written essays. The findings showed that, because rich productive vocabulary was not perceived as relevant to learners' real-life or future English use, they prioritized exam-related vocabulary knowledge and simpler lexical choices.

Taken together, despite the central role of both motivation and vocabulary in L2 learning, research on L2 vocabulary has paid limited attention to motivation, while studies of L2 motivation have similarly overlooked vocabulary. As mentioned, previous studies have primarily taken a quantitative approach by examining the correlations between L2 learners' motivation to learn vocabulary and their vocabulary knowledge (Lee et al., 2022; Tanaka, 2017; Tseng & Schmitt, 2008; Zhang et al., 2017), providing insights into the relationships between L2 motivation and vocabulary knowledge of learners as a group. However, they do not account for variation across individual learners. Qualitative data can offer a more nuanced understanding of how these constructs interact at the individual level. Moreover, few studies have examined vocabulary-related motivation within the L2MSS framework, although it has been widely used in L2 motivation research (Mahmoodi & Yousefi, 2022). Additionally, none of the aforementioned studies have focused specifically on EMI contexts, despite the widespread use of English as a medium of instruction in higher education worldwide (Dearden, 2014).

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To address the identified gaps, the present study draws on Dörnyei's (2009) L2MSS to explore L2 learners' ideal L2 selves and the relationship between those selves and the participants' motivation to learn vocabulary. In particular, the project addresses the following research questions:

1. In what ways do participants envision their ideal L2 selves?
2. What vocabulary do participants associate with their ideal L2 selves?
3. What is the relationship between the participants' ideal L2 selves and their motivation to learn vocabulary?

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4. METHODOLOGY

Recent critiques of the L2MSS highlight several limitations related to its quantitative measures. One of the key concerns is the lack of construct validity, as the core components of the model often overlap with other established constructs such as self-confidence, self-efficacy, instrumentality, and intended effort (Al-Hoorie et al., 2025). The model has also been criticized for its reliance on correlational self-report data that offer limited insight into actual learning outcomes. In addition, quantitative approaches do not adequately capture how motivation develops over time or how it is shaped by contexts and social relations (Henry & Liu, 2023). In response to these concerns, the present study adopts a qualitative approach enabling participants to construct and reflect on their ideal L2 selves and their engagement with vocabulary learning.

4.1 PARTICIPANTS

We used purposive sampling to recruit eight undergraduate Chinese participants from two universities in China: four from natural sciences (enrolled in Electronic and Computer Engineering and in Mechanical Engineering) and four from social sciences (enrolled in Economics and Finance and in Business Management). To recruit participants, an announcement was circulated at the universities via the second author's institutional connections. Having participants from different fields enabled us to explore whether their disciplines shaped their perspectives and aspirations. All participants were second-year students aged 18 to 20; four were males and four were females. Table 1 presents the participants' details. Since their major courses were taught in English, their programs of study were considered English-medium. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of Leeds Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection. All participants provided informed consent before participating and were informed of their right to withdraw. To protect participants' identities and confidentiality, their names and university affiliations have been anonymized.

Table 1 Participants' background information and scores on the Academic Vocabulary Test (AVT; Pecorari et al., 2019) and Updated Vocabulary Levels Test (UVLT; Webb et al., 2017).

DISCIPLINE CATEGORY	DISCIPLINE	PARTICIPANT NUMBER	GENDER	AGE	SCORES ON THE AVT (ACADEMIC WORDS)	SCORES IN THE UVLT (GENERAL HIGH-FREQUENCY WORDS)		
						1,000 WORDS	2,000 WORDS	3,000 WORDS
Social sciences	Business Management	1	Male	18	33	30	26	29
	Economics and Finance	2	Female	18	45	30	30	30
		3	Female	19	39	30	29	29
		4	Female	20	40	29	29	30
Natural sciences	Electronic and Computer engineering	5	Male	19	42	30	29	29
		6	Male	19	44	30	30	28
	Mechanical Engineering	7	Female	18	49	30	30	28
		8	Male	20	42	30	30	29

All participants had reached the mastery level of the Academic Vocabulary Test[1] (Pecorari et al., 2019), which measures knowledge of academic words, and the 1,000-, 2,000-, and 3,000-word levels of the Updated Vocabulary Levels Test[2] (Webb et al., 2017), which measures knowledge of general high-frequency words. These tests were chosen because they were based on recent lists of academic words and general high-frequency words and have been validated with learners in different contexts.

Knowledge of academic words is essential for dealing with the lexical challenges in academic contexts while that of general high-frequency words would enable learners to engage in a variety of communicative contexts, including academic contexts (Nation, 2022). Given the participants' scores, it is likely that they had sufficient vocabulary knowledge to communicate in a range of contexts, including academic contexts.

1 The maximum score of the AVT is 57. To reach the mastery benchmark of this test, test takers would need to have scores of at least 32 out of 57 (Malmström et al., 2025).

2 The 1,000-, 2,000-, and 3,000-word levels of the UVLT represent general high-frequency words. The maximum score of each level is 30. To reach the mastery benchmark of each level, test takers would need to have scores of at least 26 out of 30 (Webb & Nation, 2017).

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4.2 DATA COLLECTION

The data were collected at the end of the participants' academic year via individual online interviews on Microsoft Teams with the second author, who is a native speaker of Mandarin and a proficient speaker of English. The data were gathered through drawings and semi-structured interviews to explore the participants' ideal L2 selves as well as how they related to their motivation to learn vocabulary. We decided to use participant-generated images as they are considered a valuable resource, enabling individuals to convey beliefs, emotions, and aspects of their experiences that may be difficult to articulate verbally (Aragão, 2011; Kara, 2020). Before the interview, the second author met individually with participants, introduced the concept of ideal self and asked them to create an image representing their ideal L2 selves which would be discussed in the interview. In one case, a participant used an AI tool to generate an image of his ideal L2 self. Given that the purpose of the drawing task was to elicit participants' imagined desired selves and to use these images as prompts in the subsequent interview, the use of this tool did not compromise the validity of the visual representation.

The participants were also asked to annotate their drawings with vocabulary associated with their ideal L2 self, using either English or their first language (L1) if they did not know English equivalents. Participants were free to use any language resources (e.g., dictionaries or translation tools), and all chose to provide the words in English. It is important to note that, while they were asked to link their vocabulary choices to their ideal L2 selves, no guidance was given regarding which words to select. As a result, the vocabulary reflects the participants' own choices and priorities rather than researcher-imposed categories.

The interviews were conducted in the participants' L1. During the interviews, the participants elaborated on their drawings; they described the scenarios they had imagined, their roles within those scenarios, and the relevance of the vocabulary items they had added (see Appendix 1 for interview guide). The interviews were semi-structured, allowing follow-up questions to explore certain aspects in more depth (Kvale, 2007). As with all semi-structured interviews, some questions were designed to prompt reflection and comparison; however, participants were not directed towards any particular answers (e.g., selecting a specific type of vocabulary). Each interview lasted around 20–30 minutes.

To obtain background information about the participants' current vocabulary knowledge, after the interview the participants completed two vocabulary tests in the same online session: Updated Vocabulary Levels Test (UVLT) (Webb et al., 2017) and Academic Vocabulary Test (AVT) (Pecorari et al., 2019). This supplemented the qualitative data, providing further insights into the relationship between the participants' ideal L2 selves and their motivation to learn vocabulary. The tests lasted approximately 50 minutes.

4.3 DATA ANALYSIS

4.3.1 Interviews and drawings

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English by the second author. The first and second authors analyzed the interview data and drawings using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This involved familiarization with the data, generating codes, and identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) relevant to the research questions. Consistent with a reflexive approach, themes were developed through the researchers' active engagement with the data, recognizing that analysis involves interpretation rather than the passive identification of pre-existing patterns. The drawings were examined for recurring visual elements and representations of the ideal L2 self and were interpreted alongside the interview data to ensure that meanings were grounded in participants' own explanations. To ensure the quality of the qualitative analysis, member checking was conducted by sending transcripts back to participants and asking them to confirm the accuracy of the data (Sahakyan, 2023). All participants verified that the transcripts expressed their intended meanings.

4.3.2 Vocabulary associated with participants' ideal selves

The second author compiled a list of all lexical items each participant associated with their ideal L2 self. Most items were single words (e.g., *strategy*, *influence*), though some were multiword sequences (e.g., *sensory input*, *neuronal signal*) (see Appendix 2). Following this, the third author categorized the single words into three groups based on Nation's (2022) classification: general words (items that occur frequently in everyday language), academic words (items that

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occur frequently in academic texts from multiple disciplines), and technical words (items that occur frequently in academic texts from a specific discipline). Knowledge of general words is important for everyday conversation, while knowledge of academic words and technical words is essential for academic communication.

The list of lexical items was checked against Gardner and Davies's lists of the 20,000 most frequent words in the COCA academic (available at: https://www.academicwords.info/). This was chosen as a reference list because it was based on systematic corpus-driven analysis of the academic section of COCA and categorizes words into general, academic, and technical vocabulary. Despite the strength of Gardner and Davies's list, it does not capture some words indicated by the participants. To deal with these words, we consulted experts working in relevant fields and classified these words into general academic, and technical vocabulary accordingly. The words that needed checking were in the areas of Business Management, Economics and Finance, and Electronic and Computer Engineering. We therefore consulted two people with high to target-like English proficiency, one with an undergraduate degree in Finance and a postgraduate degree in Business Management, and one with an undergraduate degree in Computer Science and a postgraduate degree in Data Science. They were provided with the words and the images produced by the participants with further explanation of the context in which the participants used the words. They then needed to indicate whether the words were technical to the relevant field or not.

As for multiword sequences (e.g., *brain–computer interface intelligence*), the components of these sequences were further checked against Gardner and Davies's list as well as through expert consultation to decide on the kind of vocabulary that they belonged to.

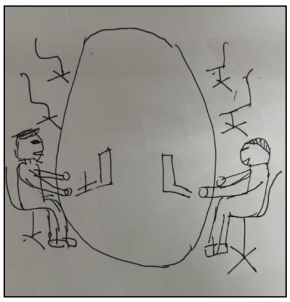
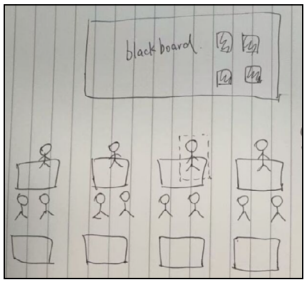
5. FINDINGS

Below, we present the findings of the study. Given the small sample size, we do not intend to draw generalizable comparisons between participants from different disciplines. Instead, we adopt a qualitative perspective to highlight variations in participants' accounts, providing insights into the nuanced and context-specific ways in which they conceptualize their ideal L2 selves and engage with vocabulary learning.

5.1 IDEAL L2 SELVES

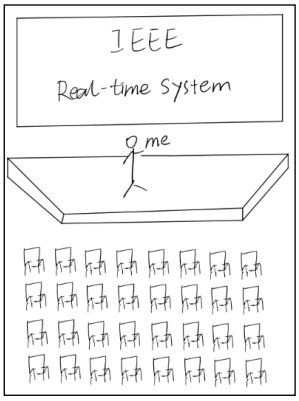
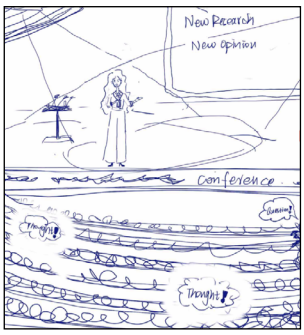
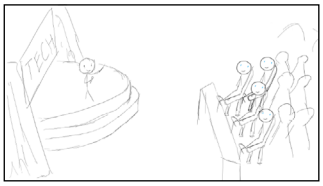
Overall, the data indicate that participants' ideal L2 selves were concrete, vivid, and closely linked to their imagined professional and/or academic communities. Rather than expressing abstract aspirations, participants consistently envisioned themselves as active contributors within their fields. Table 2 summarizes participants' ideal L2 selves alongside their visual representations, showing how these imagined selves were conceptualized both verbally and visually.

Table 2 Participants' ideal selves.

PARTICIPANTS	DISCIPLINE	A SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANTS' IDEAL SELF DESCRIPTIONS	IMAGES REPRESENTING IDEAL SELVES
1	Business Management	Someone who is an active player in his team. In the picture, he is involved in business negotiations; he explains strategies to attract investment and gain more favorable conditions for the team.	
2	Economics and Finance	Someone who is an active participant in class which focuses on collaborative learning. In the picture, she is sharing a marketing case study, similar to her exchange study experience in Sweden where "students freely share their insights as they see fit" – this is different from her current experiences.	

(Contd.)

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PARTICIPANTS	DISCIPLINE	A SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANTS' IDEAL SELF DESCRIPTIONS	IMAGES REPRESENTING IDEAL SELVES
3	Economics and Finance	Someone who works in a marketing company. In the picture, she is taking part in an online meeting with overseas colleagues to make her brand "go global".	
4	Economics and Finance	Someone who has great academic achievements and attends academic conferences abroad (e.g., in Paris) and presents her work in English; she is planning to do a PhD.	
5	Electronic and Computer Engineering	Someone who has a successful academic career and whose work has been "recognized by everyone"; he has many academic achievements, publishes in international journals and presents his work at top international conferences.	
6	Electronic and Computer Engineering	Someone who is involved in research, creates innovation and shares it with a large audience (e.g., a TED Talk); he would like to gain wider recognition and help potential users to access his products which integrate AI with psychology.	
7	Mechanical Engineering	Someone who does interdisciplinary work/research (integration of AI in Law) and shares it at conferences.	
8	Mechanical Engineering	Someone who leads a large technological company and shares cutting-edge research in his field. He wants to make great achievements and make a difference in his discipline.	

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A key feature across all participants was the level of detail in their ideal L2 self images. Their representations were not only concrete but also quite elaborate. Some drawings (e.g., those of Participants 3 and 6) even included specific elements of what they were presenting on the screen. Such a level of detail suggests strong engagement with their envisioned self. For example, Participant 3 explained:

> I'm having a meeting with colleagues from overseas because I'm thinking about future work related to a brand going global. … The meeting has several colleagues overseas. … The lower right corner is an analysis chart of our new product data. On the right side is a mock-up poster of the new product that I drew. On the right side of the keyboard are reference data that might be used, including some local feedback or other areas that can be improved and optimized. (Participant 3)

Such a level of detail suggests a strong engagement with the imagined scenario, including a clear sense of what she would be doing, how, with whom and what resources she would need to succeed. Similarly, Participant 6's AI-generated image contained graphs and conceptual visuals, representing his innovation:

> For the background image, I specifically suggested incorporating patterns resembling brain-computer interfaces to visually represent my current conceptual framework. (Participant 6)

In addition to being vivid and detailed, the participants' ideal L2 selves were situated in a specific professional or academic context. Six out of eight participants envisioned themselves contributing to their field and gaining professional recognition. For example, Participant 8 stated:

> From elementary school through high school, I've always enjoyed creating things based on online videos. Now, I hope to develop something entirely original that no one has invented before. With AI's dominant trend, I believe my inventions must drive change to avoid being replaced. … My inventions should bring positive changes in my field. (Participant 8)

Interestingly, all participants from the natural sciences and Participant 4 from the social sciences depicted themselves on a stage, presenting their research or innovation to an international audience. Participants 4 and 5 envisioned themselves having successful academic careers (e.g., doing a PhD, publishing in academic journals) while Participants 6, 7, and 8 viewed themselves leading innovations in their fields:

> In my imagination, I will be at a large international conference, with many scholars in this field sitting in the audience, possibly including well-known professors and students, my peers. Then I will give a presentation, about an academic achievement I have produced. (Participant 5)

> I imagine a scenario like the Ted Talk platform. … [It] enables my research findings to gain wider recognition, while helping potential users access the product more efficiently. (Participant 6)

These extracts highlight their aspirations to be recognized and influential in their fields, linking their ideal selves not only to technical expertise but also to achievement and the ability to share their work with a wider audience to gain recognition.

In contrast, participants from the social sciences envisioned themselves in more interactional settings. Participant 1 imagined himself in a business meeting to "attract potential investors or make the final negotiation more favorable," while Participant 3 described discussions with colleagues about the company's expansion; she envisioned her "brand going global". Participant 2 presented a slightly different image; she imagined herself in a classroom where students could "freely share their insights," reflecting her exchange study experience in Sweden, which is not typical in her current context. In the drawing, she depicted herself working with a group of peers on a marketing case study.

Finally, all participants were confident that their ideal selves were feasible but to different degrees. They recognized that achieving their ideal selves implied deepening specialized knowledge, gaining more practical skills, and engaging in networking:

> First, enhancing personal capabilities and building specialized knowledge in specific industries or fields – this is crucial. Second, developing strong communication skills. … Lastly, gaining thorough familiarity with the business environment through internships and hands-on experience. (Participant 1)

> I should first master professional knowledge and secondly accumulate relevant industry experience. (Participant 4)

> I hope to engage in practical training programs or internships to gain deeper understanding of these fields. (Participant 8)

5.2 TYPE OF VOCABULARY ASSOCIATED WITH IDEAL L2 SELVES

The words participants associated with their ideal L2 selves clearly align with their images, which is not surprising considering the nature of the vocabulary selection task. Table 3 presents the distribution of lexical items which participants associated with their desired selves. Of the 96 items, 30 were identified as general vocabulary, 43 as academic vocabulary and 23 as technical. Participants in the natural sciences selected predominantly academic (n = 21) and technical items (n = 17), with only a few general items (n = 7). In contrast, participants from social sciences chose fewer technical words (n = 6) with most of their items coming from the general (n = 23) and academic (n = 22) lists.

Table 3 Types of words per participant.

PARTICIPANTS	DISCIPLINE CATEGORY	DISCIPLINE	TYPE OF VOCABULARY ASSOCIATED WITH THE IDEAL SELF		
			GENERAL	ACADEMIC	TECHNICAL
1	Social sciences	Business management	11	1	1
2		Economics and finance	4	5	0
3		Economics and finance	7	7	4
4		Economics and finance	1	9	1
5	Natural sciences	Electronic and computer engineering	2	4	2
6		Electronic and computer engineering	1	0	9
7		Mechanical engineering	3	8	4
8		Mechanical engineering	1	9	2
Total			30	43	23

Interestingly, even though the words selected by Participant 1 belong to the general word list (11 out of 13 words), he perceived them as being strongly connected to his field and ideal self of becoming someone negotiating an important deal for his company:

> The first word, *negotiation*, involves commercial discussions that are inevitably encountered in strategic negotiations. *Business*, because I envision myself in a commercial scenario. The third word, *offer*, represents the contract and final agreement, with *price* negotiations focusing on product pricing. The word *contract* itself is the legal document, while the *deal* signifies the final commitment. (Participant 1)

Another interesting case is Participant 4. Out of the 11 words she chose, nine were academic. This aligns with her academic aspirations; she envisioned herself doing a PhD and presenting her research at a conference:

> The thesis focuses on studying how phenomena influence consumers, so *influence* is used. The conference aims for knowledge exchange and learning, thus I chose *study*. … *Change* indicates potential shifts [in research] … The report should demonstrate academic or practical contributions, so *contribution* is added. (Participant 4)

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In the case of Participant 6, nine out of 10 words were technical, which seems to align with his desire to innovate in his field. His selection of almost only technical terms suggests that he perhaps believed that deep subject knowledge is a prerequisite for him to join his professional community:

> The first term is *Brain Computer Interface (BCI)*, which refers to the concept of brain-computer interfaces. The image I've shown above demonstrates a BCI-based prototype. … I chose this direction as my primary research area. The second term is *Human-Computer Interaction*. This aligns with my current research focus on intelligent vehicles, specifically the integration of human emotions with smart vehicles. (Participant 6)

To summarize, participants' selection of vocabulary that was related to their desired careers implies that they believed that mastering those words would help them to "belong" to their professional communities and succeed.

It is worth noting that the selected vocabulary closely aligns with the themes discussed in the previous section. Since communication emerged as a key aspect of some participants' ideal L2 selves, some words explicitly reflect this focus (e.g., *presentation*, *discussion*, *ppt, slides*, *negotiation*). This suggests that sharing ideas and engaging with others was central to their ideal selves. In addition, several words were linked to some participants' desire to engage with an international professional and academic community (e.g., *global*, *foreigners*, *multilingual*). Other words were clearly linked to the participants' desire for achievement and recognition (e.g., *awards*, *innovation*, *leader*, *keynote speech*). These lexical choices provide further insights into participants' ideal L2 selves and their aspirations.

5.3 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IDEAL L2 SELVES AND MOTIVATION TO LEARN VOCABULARY

The data suggest that participants were motivated to enhance their vocabulary knowledge but only when they could clearly associate words with their ideal selves or future professional contexts. In other words, vocabulary learning became motivating when it could be meaningfully integrated into participants' imagined future professions. For example, Participant 1 explained that business-related vocabulary was more motivating because he could "visualize specific scenarios where these terms could be applied". Situating vocabulary within concrete, imagined contexts appeared to enhance its perceived relevance and facilitate retention, suggesting a close link between a vivid ideal L2 self and motivation to learn vocabulary.

> When it comes to business-related vocabulary, I'm more motivated to learn it because I believe such words can create stronger memory associations. For instance, I might visualize specific scenarios where these terms could be applied, and then realize their practical value. This approach makes my memorization process more vivid and memorable. (Participant 1)

A similar pattern was evident in the data for Participant 4, who noted that once she had developed enough vocabulary to function confidently in academic writing and reading, she would feel "more confident … and will have passion for learning". This indicates that she associated vocabulary with perceived competence and her ideal L2 self as a successful academic language user, highlighting its motivational impact.

Participants from natural sciences also linked vocabulary to their ideal L2 selves, particularly in relation to specialized knowledge. For example, Participant 6 described how encountering unfamiliar technical terms sparked curiosity and motivated him to engage more deeply with subject-specific content, which aligned with his ideal self as someone who created and shared technological innovation with others.

> When encountering unfamiliar terms, I first translate them to understand their meanings, which sparks my interest in related concepts or fields … If the concept relates to actual products, I tend to focus more on such items. I examine how they are used within specific domains and what practical purposes they serve. (Participant 6)

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In this case, the data suggest that vocabulary learning was embedded within broader disciplinary engagement, with technical terms acting as a link between language learning and the participant's envisioned selves.

Even when vocabulary was not perceived as a primary source of motivation, its relevance to the ideal L2 self remained obvious. Participant 3 stated that "my motivation affects my vocabulary level" and noted that words "commonly used at work or in daily life" were more motivating, suggesting that vocabulary linked with her profession and desired self was easier to invest in. By contrast, Participant 7 viewed vocabulary as "an auxiliary tool" and acknowledged that domain-specific vocabulary made research "smoother and more comfortable". These accounts suggest that although participants differed in how strongly they perceived vocabulary as motivating, they consistently framed vocabulary in relation to its perceived usefulness for future academic or professional engagement.

Overall, the findings suggest that vocabulary learning may become more motivating when learners can clearly see its connection to the future selves they aspire to become. This highlights that vocabulary learning may not be inherently motivating; it may become motivating when it is congruent with learners' future visions and is perceived as a necessary resource to achieve them.

6. DISCUSSION

This study has examined the nature of learners' ideal L2 selves, the vocabulary they associated with their images, and how those selves relate to their motivation to learn vocabulary. As mentioned, the participants' ideal self images were not abstract and remote; they were detailed, concrete, and connected to their specific fields of study. They imagined themselves presenting at conferences, leading teams, negotiating in business settings, or collaborating with peers in the classroom. This is supported by literature, which consistently highlights that ideal self visions must be elaborate, vivid and perceived as feasible in order to stimulate motivational behaviors (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009). Having such detailed ideal selves can partly be explained by the participants' high mastery of academic and general words. As noted, most of them had mastered the 4,000-word level, and half had achieved mastery of the 5,000-word level. Their relatively advanced vocabulary knowledge may have helped them develop more concrete visions of themselves as future users of English in academic and professional contexts. Knowledge of academic words is important for academic communication, while knowledge of high-frequency words is crucial for participating in a wide range of communicative situations, including academic and professional settings.

Empirical research suggests that stronger lexical knowledge enhances perceived linguistic competence (e.g., Alavi & Akbarian, 2012; Cheng & Matthews, 2018; Enayat & Derakhshan, 2021) and self-efficacy (Mizumoto, 2013). This may in turn support the construction of more concrete and attainable possible selves capable of performing complex academic tasks such as presenting research, leading discussions, or engaging in professional dialogue.

Another key finding suggests that most participants had a strong desire for achievement and recognition. They imagined themselves as respected professionals whose work is visible, acknowledged, and valued in their fields. Such aspirations are closely linked to self-efficacy and self-worth, which strengthen people's beliefs in their own ability to succeed (Bandura, 2006). Research shows that people's beliefs about their competence directly influence their expectations of success (Wigfield et al., 2021). Those who hold such beliefs are more likely to put effort into achieving them. Importantly, both self-efficacy and self-worth are closely connected to self-esteem (Mruk, 2006; Rubio, 2014), a core component of well-being (Judge & Bono, 2001). Leary and Baumeister (2000) argue that self-esteem monitors the quality of one's social connections and motivates behavior aimed at maintaining "a minimum level of acceptance by other people" (p. 9). Viewed from this perspective, recognition in participants' ideal selves can be understood as a desire for social validation and professional acceptance rather than achievement alone. Dweck (2017) similarly suggests that the need for acceptance and competence is fundamental for people to thrive even though it may manifest differently across cultures. This may explain why public recognition features so strongly in participants' visions; being acknowledged by peers, colleagues, and the wider professional community would validate their professional identities and reinforce their self-worth.

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It is also important to recognize that ideal selves develop within specific social and educational contexts rather than in isolation (Chan, 2016). The participants' strong emphasis on achievement and recognition was probably affected by the competitive environment in which they study, where strong performance is both expected and rewarded. This is supported by research which consistently shows a high positive correlation between Chinese learners' desire to develop skills and abilities and outperform others (Chen & Wong, 2015). However, our findings suggest that recognition implies not only competition but may also function as a means of establishing professional credibility and acceptance by desired professional communities.

As expected, the vocabulary that participants associated with their ideal selves clearly reflected their visions. They chose words they believed were essential in their professional areas. Many of these items were identified as academic or technical vocabulary, but even words classified as general were perceived by participants as discipline-specific, supporting the idea that vocabulary salience is subjective and grounded in learners' perceptions (Dang, 2018). Moreover, the participants' emphasis on academic and technical vocabulary highlights its central role in enabling L2 learners to participate meaningfully in academic and professional domains (Dang & Coxhead, forthcoming; Nation, 2022).

Although participants varied in how strongly they found vocabulary learning motivating, they consistently talked about vocabulary in terms of its usefulness for what they hoped to do in the future. This aligns with research showing that vocabulary learning is more effective and engaging when words are perceived as relevant to learners' goals (e.g., Nation & Webb, 2011; see also Yanagisawa and Webb's 2021 meta-analysis). These findings also resonate with L2MSS research, emphasizing the motivational power of vivid, elaborate and context-specific ideal selves (Dörnyei, 2009; Dörnyei & Chan, 2013). However, our study extends this view by suggesting that ideal L2 selves may shape not only motivation for language learning in general, but also learners' motivation to engage with particular lexical items perceived as relevant to their desired selves.

Furthermore, vocabulary associated with professional competence was often viewed as particularly motivating. In some cases, encountering unfamiliar academic or technical terms encouraged deeper engagement with subject-specific content, particularly when those concepts aligned with participants' desired selves. This indicates that vocabulary may serve not only as a linguistic resource but also as a means of developing subject-specific expertise and professional identity.

The present study found that the participants were motivated to learn vocabulary, but only when they could see a clear link between the words and their ideal L2 selves or future academic or professional contexts. To some extent, this finding aligns with Wang et al. (2015) and Szudarski and Muir (2026), which show that L2 learners tend to be more motivated and engaged when they can select words for learning themselves rather than relying on items chosen by researchers or teachers. These findings suggest that learners' motivation is an important factor in determining the effectiveness of vocabulary learning resources. Dang and Webb's (2025) state-of-the-art review shows that although a considerable number of research-informed resources have been developed to help learners deal with the lexical challenges in their future academic and professional communication, their implementation in real classrooms remains limited. The present study extends this insight by suggesting that to promote these resources, researchers and teachers should explore students' ideal L2 selves and explicitly link the value of these resources to their future goals. Similarly, when developing learning resources, researchers and teachers should take students' motivation, especially their ideal L2 selves, into account.

7. CONCLUSION

This study is one of few studies exploring learners' ideal L2 selves and how they relate to motivation to learn vocabulary. The findings support previous research that vivid, elaborate and feasible selves are more likely to have a motivational impact (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014). Not surprisingly, participants' desired selves were closely linked to their fields of study, but what stood out is their shared aspiration for achievement and recognition within their disciplines. This can be explained by people's need for acceptance and competence (Dweck, 2017) and a competitive study environment (Chen & Wong, 2015). The findings also suggest that learners' ideal L2 selves play a key role in determining what vocabulary they prioritize and why it matters for them.

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A key contribution of the study lies in its use of participant-generated visual data, which offers direct insight into how learners conceptualize their ideal L2 selves. By inviting participants to create visual representations of those selves, identify related lexical items, and elaborate on these in semi-structured interviews, the study captures aspects of learners' experiences that may be difficult to access only through interviews. This methodological strength enables a more holistic and multi-layered understanding of the researched phenomenon.

Another contribution is that vocabulary was treated not only as a task product (e.g., the types of words selected) but also as a lens through which participants' ideal L2 selves could be interpreted. During the interviews, participants contextualized their vocabulary choices and explained how these were connected to their envisioned selves. The selected words therefore provided insight into how participants conceptualized and prioritized different aspects of their ideal L2 selves and the contexts in which they anticipated using the language. As exemplified in Section 5.2, vocabulary also functioned as an active meaning-making resource in understanding participants' ideal L2 selves.

The study has several limitations. It involved only eight Chinese second-year EMI students in two universities in China, limiting the generalizability of the findings, including those related to disciplinary differences. Similarly, due to the small scale of the study and the small number of words needed for consultation, we only consulted one expert per discipline. Future larger-scale studies could consult a greater number of experts.

Moreover, the data were collected only once, at the end of the participants' academic year. Future longitudinal research involving learners from a wider range of disciplines, contexts, and vocabulary proficiency levels could provide further insights into L2 learners' ideal selves and their relationship with vocabulary knowledge and motivation to learn vocabulary. Future studies would also benefit from incorporating more creative and multi-modal data-collection methods, which can capture aspects of learners' ideal selves and vocabulary learning experiences that traditional questionnaires or tests may overlook.

APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Please describe your drawing. What is happening in it?

Where are you? What are you doing in the picture?

Why is this situation important to you?

How confident or prepared do you feel now to achieve this ideal self?

What do you think you need to do to achieve this self?

Please explain why you chose these words. How are they related to your ideal self? Do you think it is important to learn that vocabulary to achieve your ideal self? Why?

How well do you think you know the kind of vocabulary needed for you to succeed in your study? How does this affect your study?

Do you feel more motivated to learn certain kinds of vocabulary than others? What kind? Why?

Do you ever avoid using certain kinds of words? Why?

APPENDIX 2: VOCABULARY ASSOCIATED WITH PARTICIPANTS' IDEAL SELVES

PARTICIPANTS	SELECTED VOCABULARY
Participant 1	Negotiation, business, offer, price, contract, deal, leader, agree, oppose, sign, computer, question, ppt
Participant 2	consumer, promotion, strategy, budget, advertise, market, global, discussion, presentation
Participant 3	Social, brand, marketing, budget, idea, media, communication, culture, multilingual, advertisement, flow, sales, product, slides, shopping, retailer, live-streaming, case
Participant 4	Marketing, consumer, report, communication, influence, study, trend, change, consequence, relevant, contribution

(Contd.)

PARTICIPANTS	SELECTED VOCABULARY
Participant 5	Presentation, awards, sota, IEEE/ACM, performance, future, work, innovation
Participant 6	brain-computer interface, human-computer interaction, algorithm, microprocessor, sensory input, neuronal signal, machine learning, data transmission, artificial intelligence, software architecture, real-time processing
Participant 7	Conference, symposium, congress, keynote speech, proceedings, presenter, discussion, abstract, peer review, networking, Q&A, venue, scholarship, law, research
Participant 8	Technology, innovation, changing, lecture, foreigners, mechanical engineering, patent, invention, future potential, design, solution, efficiency

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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